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Book Review

The Mutiny Novels: A Series

A Brave Girl by Alice F Jackson

Bryda by Louise Frances Field

Eight Days by R E Forrest

In the Heart of the Storm by Maxwell Gray

Lost in the Jungle by Augusta Marryat

The Red Year by Louis Tracy

Series Editor: Pramod K. Nayar

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A series of mutiny novels edited by Pramod K. Nayar with a short but crisp preface and introduction was released by DC Publishers. The series includes Alice F Jackson's *A Brave Girl*, *Bryda* by Louise Frances Field, R E Forrest's *Eight Days*, *In The Heart of the Storm* penned by Maxwell Gray , *Lost in the Jungle* by Augusta Marryat and *The Red Year* written by Louis Tracy.

Mutiny novels have generally to be read with a caution in mind that they almost always have a British bias. *Bryda* by Louise Frances Field was authored in 1888 and reflects a fresh approach in terms of Field's depiction of the native as the loyal, submissive race that it truly was. *Bryda* and her friend Lottie escape the disturbed environs that the uprising creates and helped by their native servants the girls reach a safe refuge after going through a series of adventures. The novel attempts to cater to every bit of British imagination of the exotic life in India barring albeit, the vilification of the native.

Eight Days by R. E. Forrest published in 1891, narrates the British perspective of Indian history of the uprising, till the end of Zafar's exile to Rangoon. Celebrating the feminine heroism over male heroism the novel also seeks to establish the male villains in the native lech. On one hand the English domestic spaces are shown as the ideal, warm spaces where Jean Wardlaw like women manifest good British character and on the other hand the Indian courts are seats of intrigue where envious, deceitful women contrive against each other. Forrest manifests a major bias against the native, using words like

'swarm' for the natives thereby dehumanizing them on one hand and valorizing the British on the other who cannot be overcome by the native unless the latter come in swarms. The novel is all praise for the British, Melvil's being the only English voice that seriously dislikes the treatment of the natives by their English masters. Forrest clearly establishes the fact that the British actually helped the native by taking over and maintains that most of the natives were happier under the British rule.

The Red Year written by Louis Tracy draws on the bloodshed of the 1857-58. More than a novel the narrative reads like a documentary. The author devices a love story to make the fiction somewhat interesting but very soon the documentary mode takes over and love story takes a back seat. The British bias is again very obvious here, all English men are stoic, calm, well mannered, while natives are all bestialized. The novel is a historical romance more than fictionalized history, where some records of history are mingled with fragments of imagination to make for an interesting read. Thus, Roshanara is caught in her love between Frank Malcolm and Nana Sahib. Tracy is quite vocal in his concern of a major English crisis, that of the rape of English women by the mutineers. This red year, is seen as a time when two cultures clashed and native barbarism lost to English civilization.

In the Heart of the Storm written by Maxwell Gray is a novel about the social status concept. Mutiny happens to afford opportunity to Maxwell Gray to command respect despite his low family status. Divided into three parts the novel narrates the history of individuals rather than the uprising and bears the subtitle 'A Tale of Modern Chivalry'

Lost in the Jungle presents a sensationalization of history by Augusta Marryat. The Brisbane family again upholds the English virtues of stoicism and valour in the face of all adverse circumstances. The benevolence that the natives show to the English is undermined by a suggestion of their ignorance of the uprising. However, the novel very cleverly sidelines all pertinent political questions surrounding the mutiny. Though the subtitle suggests it being a tale of Indian mutiny, the novel is primarily a family drama told in the background of the mutiny.

A Brave Girl written by Alice F. Jackson again relies on stereotypical representation of the mutiny. Joan and Sara, two girls, preparing to save themselves from the mutiny represent the imperial femininity, Joan being a brave gun wielding girl while Sara stands for the English nurturer. Home and the field both have been given an important place though not equally important as the novel speaks only of the brave girl, thus, tilting the balance in favour of Joan emerging as the protagonist in the disturb times of mutiny. It's only towards the end that by getting Joan married the author establishes the supremacy of the domestic domain. However, the English identity and authority is to be seen even in the colonial homes and Sara stands an integral part.

History told through fiction is nothing new, relevant nonetheless. History fictionalized has more verisimilitude to truth because unlike history, fiction does not face threats of being muffled by authority. At the same time, fiction will have the stamp of its author which might cloud the truth by some considerable intensity. All the six novels in

the series written by British authors naturally have their British points of view. Covering the whole gamut, right from the beginning, the revolution, the freedom fights to the victory, these novels have a strictly Briton perspective having been authored by English writers.

The six novels in discourse are the usual stuff imperial narratives were expected to bring on. The cultured, very well-mannered officers, well-groomed women, well-kept houses and a dainty aura around is what constructs the English scene while capricious rajahs, lecherous sepoys, jealous, scandalous *janana* represents the Indian side. It's a black and white world again where grey is most conveniently forgotten. And purposefully so. It is a known fact that between 1859 and 1957 at least eighty-six mutiny novels were authored by the British to celebrate the glamour that the English imagination came to associate with the 1857 uprising. These novels served a political, cultural purpose of reinforcing the waning English confidence by valorizing the British hero and demonizing the native villain. It is a generally accepted fact that 1857 uprising was greatly brought about by the cultural arrogance of the British officers who were a poor match to their tolerant cultured, well-mannered predecessors of an earlier date. It is a genre hugely celebrating the politics of race.

In fact, the term 'mutiny' itself has an imperial bias and is an anglocentric expression. Indians have always preferred to call it 'the first war of independence'. Robert Druce observes a clear cut pattern in the mutiny novels running through five phases: the idyll, the idyll threatened, the attack, the revenge, the aftermath of order re-established; and the mutiny novels chosen by Nayar traverse all the five. These novels together document history, and help reflect the public opinion on one hand and on the other they were in their times instrumental in shaping public opinion. It might be disappointing to read the novels as literary masterpieces; however their relevance in terms of cultural history cannot be undermined.

Nayar's introduction is apt and careful. He rightly observes five themes that the mutiny novels revolve around: a) bolstering of British national identity; b) presenting stereo typical models of masculinity and femininity; c) depicting the English domesticity as a microcosm of England; d) presenting the native as dependent on the British; e) eulogizing the courage and heroism of the British. The introduction makes for an interesting commentary on the novels, putting each novel into perspective. Readers will certainly find it interesting as it provides the "other" perspective to our first war of independence.